

THE NEWSMAGAZINE *CIVILISADÓ* AND THE POST-EMANCIPATORY CULTURAL STANDARD: THE FIRST DOCUMENTARY SERIAL NOVEL IN PAPIAMENTU

WIM RUTGERS

UNIVERSITY OF THE NETHERLANDS ANTILLES

Amongst the European nations, the Netherlands was relatively late in the abolition of slavery in their colonies in the western hemisphere, namely Suriname and the six Islands of what was to eventually become the Netherlands Antilles. Shortly after abolition on July 1st 1863, a new government regulation came into force as of January 1st 1866, one of whose stipulations was the elimination of preventive censure which had been imposed on the colonies since 1820. Almost immediately afterwards, numerous new magazines began to be published. These new periodicals not only served to disseminate news, as had been the case until then with the *Curaçaosche Courant* (1816), but they also constituted a multilingual opinion press that critically followed the ins and outs of colony politics, with a particular focus on the colonial government. This is how the short-lived English magazine *The Impulse* (1871-1872) came into being. It is also how *Civilisadó* (1871-1875) was founded as the first magazine to publish in Papiamentu, thereby giving the most widely spoken language on Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao an added level of official cultural legitimacy. Present day researchers who focus on older literature in Papiamentu mainly have to resort to these news magazines, many but not all of which are fortunately kept meticulously in archives in both Willemstad and in The Hague. While some of these periodicals have been digitalized, there is still much archival work to be done.

After Emancipation, development was no longer the prerogative of the ruling colonial caste, but a necessity for an entirely new and free people. The *Civilisadó* was pre-eminently aimed at the general populace and particularly at people of non-European descent in the colony and it adopted a severely critical attitude towards the ruling power. The editorial staff consistently published in Papiamentu, and a great many articles were written in that language as well. In this way, the magazine pursued an active policy of developing Papiamentu as a national language.

At the beginning, the contents of *Civilisadó* were of the generic kind with a focus on international and national news. But the ideological bent of the magazine was clearly

revealed in its publication of serialized editions of texts having to do with freedom and social justice. In addition, serialized columns of an educational nature were incorporated: 1) on ‘civilization’ in general; 2) on education and upbringing; 3) on the detailed history of Curaçao; 4) on Toussaint L’Ouverture in Haiti; 5) on the huge slave rebellion of 1795; and 6) on Emancipation. In this way, *Civilisadó* took on an instructional mission which eventually led to the establishment of a *Civilisadó* school to provide the poor and the needy with free education. The magazine was at the receiving end of severe complaints (including official complaints from the governor himself) due to its critical. Nevertheless, the magazine appears to have been widely read by people from all social backgrounds.

I shall now discuss a serialized column published in *Civilisadó*, which clearly illustrates the post-emancipatory position of its editorial desk. Unfortunately, the text in question is not a work originally written in Papiamentu. Instead it is an adaptation of a very well-known and passionately argued defense by the French author Henri Marquand of the character, struggle and heroic downfall of the famous – or infamous – North American abolitionist John Brown, on the eve of the Civil War in the United States. The series was published in approximately thirty installments in *Civilisadó* from May 10th 1873 to May 30th 1874. It was translated from French to Papiamentu by a Curaçao author who disguised himself behind the initial ‘P’.

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Henri E. Marquand dedicated his work on John Brown to his famous colleague Victor Hugo, who accepted the honor by writing a letter of introduction for the text, dated April 11th 1860. This letter instantly set the tone for the entire book: “*JOHN BROWN ta oen grandi figura; eel a moeri manera mi a bisa na oen kamienda, pro Christo sicut Christus.*” This comparison of John Brown to no less a figure than Jesus Christ typifies the stance adopted by Marquand in this text.

John Brown (1800-1859) was born in Connecticut and raised in Ohio in a Puritan environment with his father’s abolitionist convictions as the guiding principles that inspired his way of life and his actions. When American Presbyterian minister and journalist Elijah Parish Lovejoy (1802-1837) was shot because of his abolitionist ideas, Brown solemnly swore, “Here, before God, in the presence of these witnesses, from this time, I consecrate my life to the destruction of slavery!” (*Civilisadó*, September 6, 1873)

John Brown found the inspiration for his guerrilla war against slavery in scriptural passages, which convinced him that he had to fulfill a divine mission. He saw himself as a sword plied by God, in which he did not shrink from using violence to achieve his objectives. “Of all American abolitionists, John Brown was certainly the most passionate and the most violent,” Suzanne Everett (1980: 28) concluded in *The Slaves*.

Abraham Lincoln characterized him as a ‘misguided fanatic’ and this is how he became the most controversial American of the 19th century.

That John Brown did not shun any means to achieve his aims, is well illustrated by the fact that on May 24th 1856 in the so-called ‘Pottawatomie Creek Massacre’, he with the help of his four sons and three colleagues cut five supporters of slavery to pieces. Although this event was widely decried as an “incomprehensible act executed in cold blood, which even his followers could not justify” (Everett, 1980: 28), such criticisms did not stop him from continuing his battle. On October 16th 1859 John Brown and some twenty supporters plundered an arms depot at Harpers Ferry in order to start a general rebellion in Virginia. However, the attempt failed miserably. Two of Brown’s sons were killed and he himself was taken prisoner. John Brown died on the scaffold on December 2nd 1859 – without any remorse – but satisfied ‘to have died for God’s eternal truth’. The court case and the execution attracted considerable national and international publicity among both Brown’s supporters and his opponents. Upon his death, church bells rang shots were fired. Authors, such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau and Victor Hugo defended and venerated him. Numerous books were devoted to John Brown. He is controversial to this day, where he is still variously portrayed as anything from a visionary martyr to a crazed terrorist. The song ‘John Brown’s Body’ became the Union marching song during the US Civil War (1861-1865).



On Curaçao, the series on John Brown represents the first documentary novel serial in Papiamentu. John Brown can be characterized as a documentary novel because the work has both the character of a story and a documentary.

In the foreword to the actual work, Marquand defends of John Brown mainly by implying that he was not a revolutionary in the sense that he had wanted to overthrow the government, but that his aim was ‘merely’ to free the slaves. Just as the freedom fighters George Washington (1772-1799) and Marquis de La Fayette (1757-1834) had liberated the North American whites from the English yoke during the American Revolutionary War (1775-1783), John Brown had wanted to liberate North American blacks. There was no other way open to him than violence after all other peaceful and rational

The First Printed Copy of the Song. From the Original in the Possession of Mr. James E. Coate of Charleston.

means were exhausted. That absolved him from guilt for his violent actions, according to Marquand: “Soe obra no tabatien nada mas pa objeto, koe di ranca oen raza di heende – koe e mees Dios koe a traha noos toer, a cria - for di servilidad di mas cruel koe demonianan di kara blancoe a inventa noenka.”

Born on May 9th 1800 in Torrington/Litchfield, Connecticut, John Brown was a sixth generation descent of the Pilgrim Fathers, who, according to Marquand had arrived in Plymouth Massachusetts on the Mayflower in 1620 with the motto: “Libertad! Paz riba moendoe y amoor pa toer heende.” John Brown was brought up in a tradition of unconditional faith and militant patriotism. At the age of seventeen, the young John started a program of religious studies, which an eye illness prevented him from completing. In 1821, he married Bianthe Lusk, who passed away in 1831. After the death of his wife, he devoted himself completely and tirelessly to the emancipation of the slaves by means of writing.

Marquand describes John Brown as a moderate and simple man, who never drank alcohol, didn't smoke or use tobacco, dressed soberly and did not possess anything luxurious at home because he thought it was better to sell everything luxurious and give the proceeds to the poor. Brown was very religious, prayed often, and always read from the Scriptures before meals. In addition, he was a courageous man of action who helped slaves escape to Canada. In 1854, he left for Kansas to join the raging battle there over abolishing slavery. There, Brown and twelve followers (who included his seven children) were welcomed with fanfare in the city Lawrence. Although he was taken prisoner, two of his children remained in the battle and Brown was released afterwards. In 1856, he and his supporters freed several slaves by force of arms, and he fought in Missouri in 1858. In July 1859, he bought a plantation in Virginia under the false name of Smith in preparation for an attack on nearby Harper's Ferry to free slaves.

The serial novel in *Civilisadó* describes the battle of Harper's Ferry in detail. On Sunday evening October 16th 1859 around ten-thirty, Brown's military force – which had expanded from some fifty to six-hundred – took the bridge over the Potomac in Virginia. However, Brown let a passing train through, which provoked considerable alarm in Charlestown, whereupon government troops responded with the help of the population. Sensing that the end was nearing quickly, Brown's men fled in force. Brown himself was injured and the government side lost seven men. John Brown was hauled before a judge and sentenced to death by hanging on December 2nd 1859. Brown was a hero up to the last moment. Although he was hung at eleven-fifteen, his pulse continued to beat for another 35 minutes! His body was transported by train from Harpers Ferry to Albany, where he was buried. Brown's fellow combatants were convicted as well. Two weeks after Brown's hanging, they too were hung on

December 16th – two blacks in the morning and two whites in the afternoon hours. Marquand does not hesitate to cynically comment that in this way, the court maintained racial boundaries up to and in death.

John Brown's death received considerable attention – nationally and internationally. A day of mourning was proclaimed at various places in the US, and there was much sympathy expressed for the abolitionist in Canada and in the European press. Several days before the execution, the brother of Harriet Beecher Stowe held a sermon on John Brown in the church at Plymouth, wherein he remarked that Brown's death could be good for the emancipation cause. Victor Hugo wrote a complaint against the legal system and the court procedures used to condemn Brown. Marquand, who was editor of the *Gazette* in France (where slavery had been abolished since 1848) published John Brown's life story in installments in his newspaper before publishing the entire work in book form one year later – as was customary in his day. In fact, he had already published a detailed article on Brown's death on December 2nd 1859.

Henri Marquand concludes his documentary novel serial with an account of numerous spoken and written reactions on John Brown's death, both in the United States itself and outside the country. There was considerable sympathy for the abolitionist – especially in the free black republic Haiti, which had abolished slavery in 1804. In these passages, Brown was all but canonized, continuous reference to bible passages, including Christ's death by crucifixion at Golgotha and the fratricide of Cain and Abel. Harriet Beecher Stowe's work *The Negro Hut of Uncle Tom* was quoted as well. In this last chapter, a number of letters written by John Brown are also printed as well as a few narratives on the evils of slavery, including the story of a black family who hired a pew at a church and the strife that ensued. In 1865, slavery in the United States was finally abolished after one of the bloodiest wars that the world had ever witnessed up to that time..

That events in the United States could become known so quickly in a small Caribbean colony such as Curaçao and be so rapidly described and analyzed in rather detailed serial form in Papiamentu, demonstrates the mutual contacts that already existed in those days of primitive means of communication. As a busy harbor, Willemstad had become a political and cultural hub, as demonstrated by the existence of this serialized documentary novel, by the theatrical life at that time, and by numerous performances by traveling cultural troupes. A comparativist approach to local literary activities would yield further evidence for placing Curaçao on international ideological and cultural circuits. The evidence from *Civilisadó* demonstrates that there is still plenty of work to be done in this area!

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